

time the 1920 and 1981 editions are published, the Church not only has the economic means to publish that the early saints sorely lacked; these last two editions have teams of editors, publishers, and scholars that add several layers of study aids to contextualize the content brought forth during the more charismatic and revolutionary beginnings of the church.

The book is by no means exhaustive. Topics such as the various translations of the book of Mormon into other languages, versions for the blind or deaf, oversized and pocket-sized versions are not addressed. Nevertheless, the authors present a work that highlights not only the faith but the works required to produce these six editions of the Book of Mormon. I recommend *How We Got the Book of Mormon* as a good overview of the process.

Part of a Bigger Story

Craig H. Harline. *Conversions: Two family stories from the Reformation and Modern America*. Yale University Press, 2011. 320pp. Hardcover. \$27.50. ISBN 9780300167016.

Reviewed by Wilfried Decoo

Craig Harline, professor of history at Brigham Young University, needs little introduction. His award-winning previous books on European religious history include *The Burdens of Sister Margaret*, *A Bishop's Tale*, and *Miracles at the Jesus Oak*. Together with *Sunday: A History of the First Day from Babylonia to the Super Bowl*, these books have established Harline as an international authority. His latest book, *Conversions*, is part of a Yale University Press series, "New Directions in Narrative History." Already named a Top Ten Book in Religion for 2011 by Publishers Weekly, it was also a finalist for the Mark Lynton History Prize, part of Harvard University's Nieman Foundation annual awards in journalism and non-fiction.

I. Your story in their story

The Yale series is "intended for the broadest general readership" to "speak to deeply human concerns about the past, present, and future of our world and its people" (ii). This Harline certainly

does. He is eager to make the past as relevant as possible to the present, not only by telling the past in the most spellbinding way, but also by alternating the chapters with a parallel, modern story. This does not mean that Harline feels at ease with this daring endeavor. He frequently shares moments of his “making of” story to explain the leaps he takes as an author. In the postscript, he anticipates multiple criticisms of his methodology and his positions. He worries about the reactions from historians, Mormons, Protestants, Catholics, gays, and even his own parents. But above all, he wants the reader to connect to the characters: “You have to find your story in someone else’s story, if it’s to have any meaning for you” (268). He could not have found a more fitting reader than myself.

I was 17 years old, alone at home, when two Mormon missionaries rang our doorbell one Saturday afternoon in June 1964 in Antwerp, Belgium. I was eager to hear them out. They were not reluctant to teach me, though I was still a minor (the majority age being 21 at the time). My Catholic parents reacted fretfully when I told them of my interest in Mormonism. I was told to break off all contact, which resulted in secret meetings with the elders in a secluded spot in a nearby park. When I asked my parents if I could be baptized, our relationship became hellish. I had never seen my father in such wrath, nor my mother in such desperation. It would take two years of conflicts and pleading before they would consent, on the condition that nobody would know about it. They did not attend my baptism.

So, when reading *Conversions*, it was all familiar territory. There is the 17th-century Dutch story of Jacob Rolandus who, also still a minor, causes a heartbreaking rift with his Reformed family by converting to Catholicism and fleeing to Antwerp. I could visualize his experiences all the more as they happened in my own hometown, in streets and churches I knew well. Just like Jacob, I would study letters and philosophy at the Antwerp Jesuits’ “advanced school,” exactly 312 years after him. Next there is the 20th-century American story of Michael Sunbloom who, in 1973, at age 22, “broke his parents’ Evangelical hearts by converting to the Mormon Church” (45). With just a few years’ separation, Michael and I shared the same experience: he also was taught by Mormon missionaries without his parents’ knowledge, faced his

parents' dejection when he told them of his intention to join the Mormon Church, and was baptized without them attending. Harline's description of the following years of struggle of both Jacob and Michael contains many details that are part of my own experience. A third story, limited to only one chapter, concerns Harline's great-grandparents, Carl and Mathilda, lonesome Mormon converts in Sweden in 1888. Mathilda was first to convert, after having listened to the missionaries and having received an overpowering spiritual witness. Such was also my own conversion, as well as the total isolation I found myself in in a non-Mormon and often anti-Mormon environment. Converts of any kind will indeed find part of their own story in this book.

II. Not just about conversion, not just about religion

In spite of its title, conversion as such is not the primary topic of the book. Relatively little is said about how Reformed Jacob became Catholic (83–87), or how Harline's Lutheran great-grandmother became Mormon (34), or how Evangelical Michael became Mormon (65–66). These narratives fill hardly ten pages out of 270, but that is enough to vividly illustrate the differences. Jacob's conversion was a long process. At first he became estranged from his Reformed faith because of tensions and conflicts, then found friends among Catholic peers. Finally, step by step, he became convinced by their apologetic literature. Mathilda's conversion, on the other hand, was swift and deeply emotional, confirmed by two visionary dreams. Michael's interest in Mormonism was triggered by a girlfriend who had joined the Church. He met the missionaries and liked what they taught him. Harline notes that conversion is not always "changing from one thing to another," but rather "discovering what you have always been, or believed" (66). Also important to Michael was the Mormon social network that welcomed him. Except for noting that young adulthood is the most likely age for conversion and that commonly "relationships come before doctrine" (66), Harline recognizes that identifying the deeper reasons for conversion is "all guesswork" as "unconscious forces" are also at work (92–93). So, rather than conversion as such, the extensive topic of the book concerns the developing relations between family members as a consequence

of conversion, which justifies the book's subtitle: *Two Family Stories from the Reformation and Modern America*.

Moreover, this book is not only about religion. Conversion means a thorough alteration in viewpoints, which can also take place outside the realm of church membership. Thus another significant conversion deals with Michael's understanding and accepting his own homosexuality, and that of outsiders reacting to his coming out. But Harline frames this mental shift also in a religious realm. First, "it felt more religious to Michael to admit his feelings [of homosexuality] than to condemn them" (138). Years later Michael tries to explain his homosexuality to his parents. The confrontation is not different from the clash between opposing believers who want to convert each other. Harline refers to Michael's arguments as "sort of the 95 Theses of Michael Sunbloom" and lists a long series of these arguments (213–217). For the parents, the final response is also religious: the Bible condemns homosexuality as an abomination. Michael "had no answers for the Bible's passages on homosexuality." Harline notes that "Michael would have found it helpful to know that a few believers were in fact already beginning to incorporate the latest understanding of sexuality into their reading of the Bible and their religious traditions" (230). With reference to the Catholic John McNeill's *The Church and the Homosexual*, Harline shows how new Biblical exegesis puts the concepts of homosexuality, abomination, spilled seed, and "the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah" in the softer semantic and cultural perspectives of the original Biblical period, which greatly differ from the harsh stereotypes developed centuries later. When Michael's father finally gives in, Harline compares the process with Peter's vision of the unclean food where the apostle learns that no person can be called unclean—"those he'd assumed were unclean because of their eating habits and sexual habits and more" (240). To add sexual habits as part of Paul's understanding will not be evident to all readers, but it is how Michael's father can start to accept his son's nature. Harline next explains how his own study of history has convinced him of the reality of cultural change—values and practices which were once denounced as immoral but over time became acceptable: ". . . long-standing attitudes toward homosexuality might one day be questioned too, as new understanding emerged" (262).

III. Divergent stories

The stories of Jacob Rolandus and Michael Sunbloom are hardly parallel. Harline recognizes this discrepancy. Still, he claims, “in essentials they couldn’t have been more alike” (44). In Jacob’s story, religion is the central theme, from his conversion, through his theological studies and his apologetic correspondence, to his priestly life devoted to preaching Catholicism. The overall tone is somber, in tune with Jacob’s permanent struggles. In Michael’s story, it’s about a jovial and talented man, fully engaged in real life, who converts to Mormonism (which creates a conflict with his parents) but drops out after three years (which restores the relation). The next thirty-five years are about his coming to terms with his homosexuality, his careers, his meeting his gay partner Stefan in Switzerland, the crisis with his parents over his sexuality, and his successful sandwich shop in Zurich. The overall tone is cheery, with memories of many fun moments, besides the difficult ones. In contrast to Jacob, who never reconciled with his family and never saw any of them again, Michael’s parents finally come to terms with their son’s sexual orientation. The Sunblooms’ saga ends in family love and unity. The common theme of the two stories is family conflict as the result of one member breaking with tradition, but the conditions, the obstacles, the developments, the tone, and the outcome are dissimilar.

Moreover, by detailing the wonderfully creative character of Michael and his charismatic engagement in the happiness of others, it seems Harline wanted not only to make up to Michael for the cruel treatment by fellow Mormons, but also to show what kind of an enjoyable person a gay man can be. Somewhat tongue-in-cheek he describes Michael as the best teacher ever (94–98), the best Young Adult President ever (107–109), the best flight attendant ever (184–186), the creator of the best deli sandwiches ever (252–255). In contrast, Michael’s marriage of convenience to a Swiss woman, for an appropriate fee, in order to obtain permanent residency in Switzerland so he could live with his gay partner, is brushed over in a few lines (186). Jacob Rolandus, on the other hand, does not obtain such sympathy. Jacob irritates even Harline because of his incessant “self-righteous stubbornness” (92) and his continuous venomous statements against the Reformed faith: “In

that sense Jacob too helped to break relations with his family” (209). Of course, the nature of the historical sources was very different. For Jacob, Harline had only centuries-old documents. For Michael, he had the man himself by hand as a close friend and was able to conduct live interviews with him and with first-hand witnesses. Still, we can understand Harline: “Getting to know Michael’s full story helped me better understand what the Rolanduses were going through when I found their documents later. Because of Michael, I understood more profoundly than otherwise what was at stake in that family” (264). The living Michael helped Jacob come alive too.

IV. A sad book

Conversions is a sad book. The following quotations give an idea of the hurtful effects of conversion. Jacob Rolandus broke with his own blood, “hopelessly devastating his family” (17). As a missionary himself, Harline “saw firsthand the pressure that even the possibility of conversion could put on family relationships” (22), while a recent experience of his includes the case of a young student “whose conversion prompted his heartbroken father to send someone to take the boy’s car, computer, phone, and everything but the clothes on his back, and to inform the boy that he was cut off” (22). For the Rolanduses, the running away of their son would “never be banished from their hearts and nightmares and sobs” (23). They were enveloped in “awful gloom” (28). When Michael converted to Mormonism, he had to face the “dismay” of his parents and “had never seen his father so angry” (75-76). Similarly, for his father, Jacob’s disaffection was “an unalleviated disaster” (114). Next Michael passed through the “gut-wrenching” struggle to give up Mormonism as he came to terms with his gay feelings (138). Jacob’s parents suffered over the loss of their son “just as parents suffered over the deaths of their children”—even worse because “Catholic Jacob was doomed” for eternity (146). Indeed, in the correspondence between Jacob and his sister there was “bottomless sorrow” at the thought of the assured damnation that waited the other one (155), while “their father was suffering constant death” (175). The reactions to Michael’s outing, in particular from a former Mormon missionary, one for whom Michael had served as best man, were devastating. Michael was informed

that the man refused to further communicate with him and that he “had gone through the wedding album and torn up all the pictures that included Michael” (198). Faced with so much rejection and acting on the additional advice of a confidant—“don’t tell your parents, it will kill them” (199)—, Michael kept the secret hidden from them. Then, when his parents finally learned the truth from someone else, the conflict with this parents became a “year from hell” (200). Michael got all the blame as his mother cried: “How could you do this to us?” (200). The confrontation between Michael and his parents peaked during one horrible, “heartstopping morning” (213). On the Rolandus’ side, meanwhile, the letters continued to speak of “great sorrow and persistent ache” and “perpetual wounds” (206). It is true that Michael’s story ends in reconciliation with his parents and many readers will rejoice in the happy ending. But the struggle to reach that point remains, and (as evidence around the world shows) intolerance toward homosexuals, as well as any person perceived as different, is far from solved.

The Mormon conversion story of Harline’s great-grandparents, Carl and Mathilda, in Sweden is equally fraught with sadness. The year was 1888, at the height of anti-Mormon slander. “Her mother cried and said it was all of the devil” (35). Mathilda was baptized with bystanders insulting her. Two years later, Carl too joined the Church. The couple, with their four children, emigrated to Zion in 1891, unreconciled with parents and siblings, never to see them again. It is easy to imagine how much parents and siblings lamented the day Mathilda listened to those Mormon missionaries who altered all their lives to the core. Harline’s ancestors suffered “ruptured relationships because of religion” (38). True, in the long run, things turned out fine among the descendants, but such remote prospect would give little solace for the present pain.

One would expect the new faith to provide the haven where those outside storms cannot reach. But even that is often an illusion. Jacob, in spite of his devotion and sacrifices, struggled for years to become fully accepted in his Catholic environment as he had to prove himself a true and trustworthy convert. Next, during his labors as a Jesuit, “he found himself struggling against his co-religionists” (227) to finally die in misery and loneliness. Mi-

chael, in spite of his boundless commitment as Young Adult President, was “stung by the public censure” (111) he had to endure over trivialities, followed by “the blatant crap” (138) of gossip about his evolving relations. Still, even as an “inactive” Mormon, he kept his sympathy for Mormonism for many years, until Proposition 8 “deeply upset” him and he decided to have his name removed from church rolls (259). Carl, Harline’s immigrant ancestor, did not find religious happiness in his new land, as he lost his daughter to illness two days after arrival and never participated in the temple ordinances (36)—which was at the time one of the main reasons to emigrate to Zion.

A question that emerges from so much sadness is how to assess the appropriateness of conversion efforts by evangelizing faiths such as Mormonism. Harline does not raise the question explicitly, but his compassion for the hurt that conversion causes and his call for tolerance and mutual acceptance will raise the question for some readers. In chapter 33 he talks at length on the perception of common ground as the key to peace, rather than focusing on differences (which proselytism would imply). The Rolanduses failed to see that family bonds ought to supersede religious differences. “In the Sunbloom family, in contrast, Michael was no longer primarily gay to his parents, but becomes a loved one” (251). Harline points at a rabbi, a sheik, and a minister in Seattle who meet together “to seek mutual understanding, . . . to find commonality and respect, to correct misconceptions, and to soften disagreement. The process hasn’t caused them to leave their traditions, but to leave a particular version of their tradition, and of other traditions” (251). Mormon missionaries, on the other hand, “were young on purpose, because their difficult task required zeal, energy, enthusiasm, and a little naïveté” with its disadvantages of “uninformed opinions, rigidity, and know-it-allism” (63).

V. Creative nonfiction

Finally, a most striking characteristic of Harline’s work is the style. The Yale series, “New Directions in Narrative History,” defines its publications as “creative nonfiction” (ii)—an oxymoron with its own challenges. Nonfiction implies that all we read has occurred as described. The creativity lies in the way the facts are

told. Harline is a master storyteller, taking the reader on a vivid journey across time. The opening pages, describing Jacob's flight from his parental home in the middle of the night, are worthy of a gripping novel (1-6). Moreover, the nature of the primary sources certainly informed the narrative style: a personal journal, correspondence with family and friends, and in the case of Michael, interviews. But it is hard to assess to what extent some details sprout from Harline's imagination based on his knowledge of the times and his understanding of the facts. In that sense some of the decor in Jacob's story is probably a little conjectural, while in Michael's case Harline speaks from personal experience with a friend and from a material setting he has been part of. Still, Harline regularly reassures us of his submission to the sources by putting direct citations in italics. These are like little beacons along the way reminding the reader that we are navigating in the wake of primary sources. There is, wisely, no attempt at recreating direct dialogues between the characters. Everything remains descriptive, with indirect speech to convey the content of letters or conversations. But "traditional" historians must accept that there are no usual references to sources in the book itself and must confide in the impressive amount of sources in the bibliographical essay at the end.

Jacob's story—the real "historical" account situated in the 17th century and the prime reason for writing the book—also sits in the broader framework of Harline's expertise with European religious history. It is not only sustained by directly relevant sources in the archives of the Jesuits and the Dutch Reformed Church, but also by comparisons with similar stories and events in various parts of Europe. The frequent use of "maybe" and "perhaps" does not undermine credibility, but rather expands our comprehension. E.g., "Maybe [Jacob] was as torn as Sir Henry James in England, who suffered so much stress during his conversion that he became mentally unbalanced, or as Madame de Fontrailles in France, who wrote of her deep interior agitations before her conversion" (89). Or: "Perhaps [Jacob] said nothing about Rome because of his disappointment at not getting the answer he wanted from either the Capuchins or the Jesuits" (203). Such an approach invites the reader to take part in justified conjectures, while Harline does not cross the factual line.

There are almost no footnotes in Harline's book. But one carries a lot of weight: "Michael Sunbloom is not his real name; neither are the names, and some of the places, in the rest of his story" (45). One can understand why Harline—no doubt in consultation with his friend—felt the need to protect the identity of Michael, but the artifice may leave readers with an uneasy feeling, as if the "ideal" Michael, whom we learn to love throughout the book, is finally less real than Jacob. Where would the Bellevue deli be to order one of his superior sandwiches?

VI. A book with a message

Conversions is a remarkable book, one many people will be tempted to read rapidly because of the absorbing storyline—how will this end for Jacob and for Michael?—but next need to read again, more slowly, to discover its depth and to ponder its message. *Conversions*, indeed, wants to be more than the tale of two families and more than a history book. Not only is Harline very much present throughout the book with personal reflections, but toward the end he moves the book to an ethical level. History must teach us vital lessons about life.

The last two chapters and the postscript are, foremost, a cry for tolerance, or rather for plain mutual acceptance, covering some 30 pages. Though not explicitly condemned, proselytism does not seem to have a place in this context: "The religious moment, or impulse, lies not in the drawing of lines or in the defending of a position but in crossing lines and inviting the Other to meet on common ground" (249). Reconciliation is the key. The Good Samaritan and even Alma 7 from the Book of Mormon, with its insistence on humility, patience, and long-suffering, are referred to (268). And so, "Michael's story wasn't merely a gay or Mormon story, and the Rolanduses not merely a Protestant or Catholic story, but that they might have even wider resonance than I'd supposed: they were part of a bigger story about anyone seen as Not The Same" (271).

The Feeling of Knowing

Tyler Chadwick, ed. *Fire in the Pasture: Twenty-first Century Mormon*